



David Phillips works as a Research Assistant Professor of Economics at LEO where he helps lead several LEO projects coordinating study design and implementation, directs data analysis, and disseminates results through academic publications. His research focuses on poverty, particularly as it relates to low-wage labor markets, crime, and housing. His research has been published in high quality economics field journals and presented widely for policy audiences. Prior to coming to Notre Dame, David received a Bachelor's degree from Butler University and earned his PhD in Economics from Georgetown University. He worked for four years at Hope College in Holland, Michigan as an Assistant Professor. David also contributes his valuable expertise on the Chicago Cubs, small town Indiana, and literature for toddlers.

DAVID PHILLIPS

Why did you join LEO?

A decade ago, I started a Ph.D. because I was good at math and thought God could use a person with an economics graduate degree to fight poverty. Actually doing that in reality turned out to be a bit more complicated, but that's still my basic goal. About 18 months ago, I became convinced that I could best fulfill that calling by becoming part of LEO. Notre Dame holds a unique place in higher education with its combination of academic quality, alumni engagement, and Christian commitment. LEO has managed to leverage that place to create a lab that has an unusual combination of intellectual rigor, access to resources, and real connections with agencies doing day-to-day anti-poverty work. I was glad to join up. And it helps that they built it 30 miles from where I grew up.

In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?

Research facilitates communication and understanding along a chain of people. People who are poor do not regularly interact with policymakers, donors, and others with the most decision-making power. When those groups do meet, miscommunication can dominate. Field experiments, statistical evidence, and academic research provide an opportunity to present the voices of people struggling with poverty in the language of those who have the most power to effect change. At their best, our tables of statistics allow those who struggle with poverty to say in the most succinct and accurate way possible, "this is what my life looks like, and here's how the decisions you make affect me." Better understanding will not fix everything that is broken, but I have hope that a little bit of light makes a difference.

What makes LEO's approach to research unique?

Many economists evaluate the effectiveness of anti-poverty interventions. Few build an organization that encourages researchers to partner sustainably with service providers. Collaborations with service providers are messier and more likely to fail than research projects completed entirely in an office. There are so many more moving parts! As a result, many academics who want to achieve tenure or build a reputation avoid complicated collaboration. LEO has created an alternative structure. Research faculty work for LEO full time, which allows us to make vital but slow to pay off investments in relationships with service providers. The permanent staff manage the organizational structure and the details of complicated projects that academics like me would bungle. All of this allows us to focus on making a deeper impact.

How do you see LEO expanding in the next few years?

First, I think state and local governments will increasingly look to partner with LEO on evaluating anti-poverty programs that they fund. Government frequently conducts anti-poverty work through local non-profit organizations, and evaluating such programs requires coordinating and compromising among researchers, local government, and non-profit service providers. Experience helps. Through our collaboration in Rochester (see Research Project Update), we have built a capacity for this work.

Second, I think LEO will become known for leading a wave of rigorous research on homelessness. While there is some good work out there, few studies rigorously measure the effectiveness of responses to homelessness. LEO's on-going work on Chicago's Homelessness Prevention Call Center has given us a prominent place in this arena already.

I am excited about a pair of early stage collaborations with counties, Santa Clara (CA) and King (WA), where we are building on both of these strengths. In both places we aim to measure the impact of common interventions against homelessness which are funded by local government and implemented by local non-profits.